

Open up the doors to Heaven (let me in) by Peaterparker

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Anal Fingering, Anal Sex, Banter, Blood and Violence, Bottom Billy Hargrove, F/F, F/M, Frottage, Gay Billy Hargrove, Gen, Getting Back Together, God Complex, Guns, Homophobic Language, Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Implied/Referenced Suicide attempt, M/M, Marijuana, Oral Sex, Preacher AMC au, Preacher Billy, The Upside Down, Top Steve Harrington, Vampire Robin Buckley, fighting as flirting, the mind flayer is genesis

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Claudia Henderson, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Erica Sinclair, Heather Holloway, Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Mr. Sinclair (Stranger Things), Mrs. Sinclair (Stranger Things), Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Ted Wheeler, Tommy Hagan, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Robin Buckley/Heather Holloway

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Summary:

Something Holy 'bout a place of worship, a church passed down from his father, riddled with bullet holes and doused in whiskey with an aftertaste of Cowboy Killer Marlboro Reds. He feels rapture with his knees and elbows on the hardwood floor and the stained glass

painting over his face with the streaming sunlight. Steve's cut off grunts and harsh breaths mirror his own, hips slapping and shoving him forward on his sore joints. Billy swore he was saved from his old ways, promised the Lord above that he'd be just as good as his daddy had taught him to be but Steve being here, like this, felt almost like he could save him too.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Hey hi and hellooooo!

There is a LOT going on with this and I already have like 70% of it written out so updates should come frequently (I say this as I am one week behind on my personal schedule to have posted this). I plan on covering what I've watched up to season 4 and this holds no relevance to any of the comics. I have taken creative liberties with everything and I hope y'all enjoy!

That being said, the F slur is used but only Billy saying it as himself, there might be confrontational homophobia in future updates but as much as I love homophobia (sike!) I don't want to get too far down that rabbit hole.

This might be a little slow for a first update, I really wish I could include more but it would give too much away just yet.

Not beta'd so all mistakes are my own (I know there's a few, I got really lazy and over excited).

Some information to keep in mind: Billy and Max moved to Hawkins when Billy is eight, they stay there until Billy's sixteen. They move to Louisiana to live with Max's grandma and then back to California to live with Billy's grandma. I have aged the party to where they are 19-21 and Billy and Steve are 28.

Tags and all will be updated with the next part! No serious warnings just yet but heed that 'depictions of violence' warning. Will talks about self harm and suicide in a vague way, more concerned about the sin implications of it. Mentions of Karen and Ted's

sex life, Holly misconstrues it. Anything else worth mentioning please let me know!

He wakes with a start and blinks fast in the bright sunlight streaming across his bed. The echoes of his daddy's shouts and the click-pull of a gun follow him into consciousness. He'd drank too much whiskey last night to fall asleep in the first place, something he almost regrets now as he shifts the muscles of his back to ease the tension already coiling in them. The sweat fueled by nightmares clings around his temples and elbows, makes his knees stick to the sheets when he rolls over to check his clock and coughs hoarsely a few times before he slips his feet over the edge of the bed and lifts himself up. Despite his mouth feeling like an ashtray it feels like a regular day, like it felt yesterday when he woke up, if not a little bit darker. Hawkins is filled with sin, always has been and probably always will be. Keeps men like him employed though, so he can't complain too much. He's got a long day of figuring out how to pay for repairs to the church and how to bring the masses back, figures he's owed a few hours visiting the families that used to love his daddy's sermons.

The water in the shower takes twenty minutes to warm up. He'd forgotten to call a plumber last week like Max'd asked him to do, so he's probably better off checking it out himself and avoiding her wrath. He adds it to the mental list of shit he's got to today after his sermon. He'd picked out his passages late last night, tried to think of something that'd really strike home for his crowd but nothing stood out to him. He'd asked God for some guidance, a little higher education to help him inspire and touch hearts but he'd gotten nothing back. Not even a little nudge towards modern sins and their consequences, but a whole wild drunk ramble about the Five Foolish Bridesmaids had spewed from his lips and Max had laughed and laughed and laughed until he grumbled his way up the stairs to faceplant on his mattress.

He smokes his first cigarette of the day while he's doing up the buttons of his shirt and fingering the metal points of his collar. His boots look dusty when he steps outside to slide them on, usually he'd take better care of them but considering the walkin' he was going to have to do he didn't much care. Let them fall apart and he'd just have to buy more. Nothing else was new. Rinse and repeat. He makes it to

the end of the drive and glances at the sign to see *open your ass and holes to Jesus* and growls. Fuckin' punk ass kids in this fuckin' punk ass town. He suspects that Mike Wheeler'd started the trend of fucking with the church sign and now it's a rite of passage thing. He makes a mental note to bring it up with Max and things they can do to prevent the sign from being changed again as he picks the dropped letters up and fixes his damn sign.

He kinda sucks at being a preacher. Totally sucks if he feels like bein' honest, which is something he's doing a lot more than just trying on for size but it still comes with its own difficulties. Like when Murray Bauman wants to yap on about his controlling mother for hours that seem to never end. Billy stutters out his sermon and can't seem to find a genuine tone, seems to ramble on until Max starts to play the organ over him with an annoyed expression on her face. She'd just turned twenty in the past month but still acts like the twelve year old Billy'd had to help raise all those years ago. She helps him create his sermons and tries to inspire that thing inside his blood that kept the Hargrove men before him interested in God and the power He gives. Max hasn't always been a devout follower of God, but shit, neither has Billy. It was something that brought great pain to his daddy, only one of his kids showing up to the church everyday and it wasn't the one that was going to inherit everything when the time came.

Billy knew God was real to a point, he never tried to really fight his daddy on it, just bowed out when push came to shove and let his daddy take the hits. He'd rebelled in other ways against his daddy and his Creator, like being a no good-sorryass-son of a bitchin' faggot. But he'd guessed if God didn't want a faggot preaching His word and bringing Him souls to save He'd've struck Billy down a long time ago. So he wraps his shitty sermon up before Max can cut him off with the pipes again, pushes these thoughts to the bottom of the barrel that is his mind and steps off into the kitchen in the back of the church to catch his breath. Max slips out the side door and starts getting the barbecue ready. That was also something that was her idea, someway to bring in more families and faith.

The sun shines on him, warms him in his black suit while he fixes his cuffs and Hawkins looks alive with it. Makes Hawkins look heavenly like this. It's not something he's often thought about Hawkins before,

knowing the sin and evil that festers in this town. It's what brought the Hargrove family here all those years ago, way before he was born even. His great grandfather and his great grandfather before him all flocked here from their various places across the country to fight the evil that grows. It's not children and their pornographic tactics, although his daddy had a lot to say about that too, but something darker. It's just under the surface but Billy's never been able to find it, just felt it. Felt it especially at night and in the woods. Lotsa kids gone missing when he was younger but everyone said it was because they were drunk, stupid and alone in those woods. Never got investigated as more than them falling to their death in the old quarry.

He's stuck in the blazing sun with Murray Bauman talking about his wretched old lady when he makes eye contact with Will Byers across the way. The kid's always quiet, Joyce's been bringing her two boys with her to their church for years. Jonathan is Billy's age but they've never been friends, two different types of people from the same place but Jonathan is the one who got out and stayed out. Might only come back to visit but damn sure isn't stuck here anymore. Billy sees the Wheeler family has joined them on the picnic blanket that Joyce has spread out. They look almost like a family from a magazine, the Wheelers do. He's blinking back to his own reality when he realizes that Holly Wheeler has been staring back at him this whole time.

He watches her stand up, say something to her mom and then sneak by the coolers. She waits til Max's back is turned to grab a beer and scurries along the outside of the group gathered then waits patiently while Murray blathers on until she finally clears her throat and steps between them.

"Brought you this, Preacher." She says quietly.

"Well, that's awful nice of you Miss Holly." Billy says with a small smile. Murray gives them a weird look then shakes his head, stalks off still grumbling about his fuckin' Ma.

"I actually wanted to talk to you about something." She speaks quietly and it's so odd for him to think about her growing up around Mike and being so quiet. She's gotta be thirteen at least now, makes him hate how old he is even though he's not quite out of his twenties

just yet.

"I'm all ears." He opens the beer and takes a quick sip.

"I want you to hurt my dad." He nearly spits his sip out. "I don't like him. He hurts my mom."

Yeah, he's heard this one before. Almost went through with giving Ted Wheeler a bit of his own medicine before he realized what was *really* goin' on. No way was he getting anywhere near this ever again. He pats her on the shoulder.

"When you're a bit older I'm sure Nancy and Mike can explain it to you. I'm sorry, Holly."

"You know, I ask God to take care of him all the time." She's picking up volume now, looks like she's about to start a shit fest and Billy's begging for a retreat of any kind. "I *beg* God, but he must like seein' us suffer because he doesn't ever say much to me."

"Because God's not a hitman, Holly. He's not gonna clean house for you."

"Ugh, you sound like Mike." She kicked the sand and huffed. "If you won't help me then I'll do it myself." She storms off, kicking sand all the way and ignoring Karen calling out to her.

He can't wait for next Sunday.

He sits in his truck for five minutes, doesn't even smoke a cigarette, just chews at the hangnail he's been picking at on his thumb for the last three hours. He's made social calls on behalf of the church before. Sure, he'd been a minor and his smile could melt old women's hearts at the drop of a hat but he still had that power. He decides it's time and stomps up the steps to ring the doorbell.

Erica opens the door and her friendly expression drops.

“Oh, it’s you.” She rolls her eyes. “Lucas isn’t home and he doesn’t have any money.”

He knew this was gonna be fun.

“Not here just for Lucas. Was hopin’ your parents were around. Wanted to talk to y’all about the church.”

Erica snorts in his face.

“They used to go out to Kokomo after your dad died. Now they go to Muncie. Good luck persuading them, Mom likes their *pastor*.” But she opened the door for him and he’s happy to say that all he really needs is a foot in the door.

“Haven’t seen you or your boyfriend in a while.” Erica says like the last time he saw her she wasn’t in fuckin’ middle school. “Got kinda quiet around here until the next round of degenerates found their way.”

“Yeah, well, I’m back and I’m better.” She rolled her eyes at him again. “I’m serious. Max and I are fixing up the church. Gonna get this place right as rain again.”

“Oh, yeah, because *God* can fix this place.” She muttered before leading him to the den in the back of the house where both Sinclair parents were reading their respective news articles.

“Erica, I sure hope you didn’t let a strange man into our home.” Mrs. Sinclair said all smartly, raises an eyebrow over her newspaper when Erica scoffs.

“Please, he’s no stranger than he was when he was holdin’ Lucas up by the throat. Says he’s a changed man now, mama, hear ‘em out.”

It was somehow the worst thing Erica could say and the best. Billy coughed and both Sinclairs sat their papers down to stare at him weirdly.

“Ah, I guess that is Billy Hargrove.” Mr. Sinclair said, pushed his glasses up his nose and still had to squint through them to focus on Billy. Just like old times.

“Sorry to drop in unannounced.” He said politely. Mrs. Sinclair was still giving him a look over, her eyes roving over his face, undoubtedly judging his posture and Billy tried to stand tall through her intimidation.

“So you’ve taken over the church?” Mrs. Sinclair asks.

“Yeah. Max and I have been working on it and opened it up to the public almost a month ago.” Billy smiles a little bit at the memory of the first Sunday they had their doors opened. One person showed up.

“Is it anything like how your daddy ran it?” Mr. Sinclair asked, keeping his tone blank and his face empty. A test if Billy ever saw it.

“No, sir. For starters there’s no drinkin’ on church property.” Mr. Sinclair nods once. Everyone knows Neil was a heavy drinker, it’s a reputation he upheld until it was his downfall.

“We quite like the place and the people we attend with out in Muncie.” Mrs. Sinclair says. “They’re real family people. Always so welcoming and lovely.”

Billy holds his breath. He’ll beg if he has to. The Sinclairs don’t hold the monopoly of Hawkins social life amongst religious people but they sure have a large portion of it.

“I also heard from Karen Wheeler that you give a good sermon, help the teens relate to your messages and inspire faith.” Billy’s shocked Karen said all’a that about him when she’s only been there two Sundays but gift horses and all. “So maybe we’ll just be by to check you out this Sunday. Lucas, too.”

Erica coughed to hide a laugh behind him.

“Sounds wonderful, Mrs. Sinclair.” Billy said warmly. “I look forward to seeing y’all.”

Now he just had to tell Max that Lucas Sinclair was gonna be there on Sunday. God is forgiving but Maxine Mayfield is not.

He returns to his truck when he's seen enough of the chaos in the street. People shouting, their wild ass kids too, the litter along the pavement that probably won't ever be touched again, the flyers advertising the fight match flapping in the breeze along all sides of the street. He's surprised there's been this much of a turn out to begin with. He counts his breathing, a habit he'd picked up years ago from his father, and reaches for the flask of whiskey he keeps in the glove box. He opens it but doesn't bring it to his mouth, instead he feels like he goes into a trance for a few minutes just to let all the tension in his body release.

It's not until after watching the new school mascot and the old school mascot, of which he'd thought were worn by the same person but apparently not, brawling in the street in front of the largest crowd since the Hawkins parade that Billy realizes how fucking exhausted he is. He wonders again, not the first nor last time as always, what God's plan for him really is. Is he supposed to just stay here in Hawkins forever? If so then why does it feel like this? He doesn't want to admit that it's soul sucking but-

There're three hard taps on his window. It startles him enough to spill a little whiskey into his lap. He hadn't even gotten to take a sip. Divine intervention, huh. He glances up, wide eyed and unsure, only to meet Hopper's steady and steely gaze.

"Told them that this would only stir shit up." Hopper waves a hand over his shoulder and lights a cigarette with the other. "People get restless in small towns, too much excitement and it's only bound to get out of control."

"Guess they should be glad you're watching out for 'em." Billy says, rolls his window down further and accepts the cigarette being handed to him. Hopper curls his lip at the comment but otherwise lets whatever else he was gonna say roll off his back with a brief shake of his shoulders.

"Been hearing that Will wants to have a talk with you." Hopper says,

voice gruff but leaves no room for Billy to talk his way out of it. "Should come over for dinner one night this week."

Billy can't say no and Hopper knows this by the grim look on his face. So he agrees, says he'll be by sometime within the week and then Hopper nods once and walks away. Billy never got to know Hopper the way that Maxine did when they first came up in Hawkins. By the time Billy had gotten involved with anything bad it'd been far beyond Hopper's control.

Billy finds out that Steve's back in Hawkins through glimpses of his old car. The plate's been changed, probably stolen if Steve's still pulling his shit, but otherwise it's the same car he'd bought when he was fourteen and his daddy was shot in front of him. He watches it tear through the parking lot across the way from the general store where he and Max are handing out flyers for the coming Sunday's service. He can almost make out Steve behind the wheel, his cocky grin in place like always as the engine revs under his control. It feels like a threat and a promise, sends chills down his spine in anticipation and when he looks at Max out of the corner of his eye he breathes a sigh of relief that she's not paying him any attention. He says a quick prayer for her being none the wiser and steps towards a family with a pleasant smile and a warm hand extended.

Steve's been parked and watching him for about thirty minutes now. Billy was willing to wait him out but now it's making his skin itch with discomfort, he lights a smoke the same time that Billy does and tosses his out round the same time as well. Max has definitely noticed and he's almost sure she's debating busting the window and pulling Steve from the car herself. Max was always real great with Steve like that, they all caught on like a house on fire when they'd first moved to Hawkins regardless of all the blackened eyes and bloodied lips his daddy skinned his ass for. Except now it's different. Steve's different, *Billy* is different, ain't nothing gonna change and Billy has the fleeting thought that he might be Steve's next job. Maybe that friend's his

decided Billy knows too much finally and wants to clean their shit up.

The sun hits high noon and Billy's tired of playing cat and mouse. Lord forgive him but he's not gonna be intimidated by Steve. He gives his flyers to Maxine, lights a smoke then stomps over to the fuckin' car. Steve's got the window down, leaning back all relaxed, small smile in place like he was *waiting*. Bastard.

"What're you doing here?" He asks, tries not to sound too demanding. If Steve's in a good mood then Billy can play nice and get him to leave, it's almost easy hat to remember how to do it. He feels it settle around him like a weighted blanket.

"Think the way you say it is 'come here often?' But I could be wrong." He winks and grins over Billy's shoulder. "Hey, Max."

"Steve." She says neutrally and Billy bites his cheek til he tastes blood to keep himself from snarling at her to walk the fuck away. Steve blinks at him twice before he smiles again.

"Got a job for us, Bills." Says it like it's a Tuesday night and he picked up the tacos from Billy's favorite place two blocks from their apartment in California. Almost lovingly, Steve's always so good at his *butter wouldn't melt* act but Billy knows better.

"Doin' my job here just fine." He refuses to admit his voice may sound hoarse.

They were havin' a standoff right there in the parking lot across from one of the busiest stores in town mid-day. Billy didn't take his eyes off Steve's a single time, kept his jaw wound tight but his shoulders loose like this was only a mild inconvenience and not a fucking ticking bomb of a situation. He knows if Steve keeps him like this for so long it'll only mean trouble in the end and he doesn't need Maxine pulled back into the shit.

"Can leave now." Billy grinds out his smoke.

"Get in the fuckin' car." Steve says low, voice bringing goosebumps to Billy's skin.

“Or what?” Billy licks over his teeth, grins when Steve takes it for the challenge it is and opens the car door.

“Oh, Christ.” Max sighs from behind him. Billy shoots her a glare which she returns tenfold. Steve steps out but doesn’t get in Billy’s face which is different and strange. He leans against the car and crosses his arms over his chest. Steve huffs to himself a few times, mumbles some shit that Billy can’t even make out and then looks back up.

His face is different than it was when they were together. He looks tired, a little too pale and skinny. His eyes seem bigger, browner, when they flick across Billy and then back to the sky. He’s so fucking dramatic, Billy wants to smile or maybe even just start crying.

“Didn’t ya miss me?” Steve pouts, like he’s real torn up about Billy not missing him. Gets his big bambi eyes a little watery. He is such a rat bastard and Billy fucking adores it.

“No more’n you missed me.” Max sighs behind him, a fire breathing dragon that knows so much more than she should.

“Well, I miss you lots. Real lots.” Steve bobs his head, dipping his chin up and down and making his shoulders jerk with it. Billy is such a sucker for this dramatic dipshit. “And you don’t even wanna talk to me.”

“Harrington-” Billy all but snarls until Max grips his elbow and pulls him back a step. She looks real upset before schooling her features and looking up at him all serious.

“I’ll finish passing out the flyers. I have a few places I could drop some off before my shift.” She gives Steve a weird look then shifts closer to Billy. “You get rid of that and I’ll meet you at the church after I get off work. Can’t do this shit with you right now.”

Billy swallows then nods. “See you at the church.”

“Bye, Max!” Steve says, but he still looks weird. A little crestfallen, like the lack of Max responding to him was saddening. He should feel lucky. His face changes again when he looks back to Billy. “Let’s go.”

Steve slides into the driver's seat and starts the car with a flourish. Billy misses the sound of his baby purring under his hands but refuses to give Steve the satisfaction of admitting he misses anything about the old days. They take off out of town through back streets instead of major highways, Steve's fucking killing him with the dramatic shit. He can almost hear the bastard narrating *and here's where you knocked my tooth out! Oooh, and over here was where I knocked your tooth out!* He's been shutting down any conversation that Steve's been trying to start for the last ten minutes, they're well and truly out of Hawkins proper now, few more farms and they'll be on country roads for hours.

They stop at the last family owned convenience store before it's strictly farm land and they both get out of the car. Billy's not gonna talk til they get wherever they're going and when they do get there he's gonna shut the shit down. All honorably, you know. 'Cause he's a damn preacher now. Fuck. Steve acts like a pissy brat when he stomps into the store to pay, slams the door and everything. Billy takes his time in the restroom, it's gross and the light bulbs hum like they're about to burn out but the water runs clear in the sinks so he guesses it's not the worst roadside restroom he's seen.

Steve's still in his mood when Billy comes back to the car. He's a little too rough when he rips open the gas cap and rolls his eyes at Billy's stern glare. Billy just leans against the car and raises an eyebrow.

"You are so annoying, oh my god." Steve says dramatically.

"Why are we even doin' this? Why you suddenly need me for a job? Especially now." Billy asks, tone growing more agitated when Steve just stares at him balefully instead of cutting Billy off like he usually does.

"Because this is an 'us' job." He says it like it's so simple. Like Steve and Billy jobs were ever a thing other than a way for them to make a little cash to hide out on.

"No such thing as an 'us'. You damn well know that."

Steve huffs out a half laugh. "What do you want me to say? You want me to fuckin' say sorry? Will that make you stop being such a bitch

and get this job done?”

“I don’t want you to say a fuckin’ thing. All I’ve ever asked from you Steve is to accept that that ain’t how I wanna live anymore.”

“You’re so fucking self righteous now, right? Living up to your Daddy’s legacy? Get in the fuckin’ car.”

For some reason he does. He gets in the car and slams the door behind him, has half the mind to lock Steve out and drive off in glory. He starts chewing on his hangnail instead. Steve’s nearly hitting 100 mph, flinging his hands in a rant about Billy’s God complex the size of Texas when two hands shoot out from the backseat and wrap around his throat. Billy’s reaction is instantaneous. He’s turning and hitting one of the two bald men, forcing him to release Steve and zero on Billy instead. Steve pulls his gun from the back of his pants, cocks it and goes to pull the trigger but one of the bald bastards grips his wrist and points through the roof of the car. Steve swears up a storm and climbs between the seats. Naturally, Billy takes the wheel and fuckin’ floors it.

This is the exact kinda life that Billy left behind and he almost hates Steve for bringing him back into this shit, begins to wonder if this was fuckin’ planned to scare him home. He keeps catching glimpses in the mirror of Steve grinning at him before landing his next hit on the guy’s face and he’s not saying it’s *doing something* to him but Steve’s *always done something to him*. The way he bites the guy’s ear and spits it towards Billy’s shoulder doesn’t even ruin it. Bastard. He sends a quick prayer to keep the car on the road and not in the cornfield immediately to his left.

“Bill, get off this road.” Steve grunts as he rolls to reach for the gun he dropped below the seats and headbutts the struggling bald bastard. A phone lands it’s way in his lap and sees that someone’s called for backup.

They end up in the cornfield. Steve’s laugh is almost drowned out by the sound of corn hitting the car. The sound of the gun going on reverberates for what seems like hours after it comes. There’s no movement from the back. He finally stops and leaps from the car as fast as he can. Paces ten steps to the right and twenty to the left,

cursing and cursing and cursing Steve's name. He hears him talking to someone else but his voice is soft and the returning voices are too. He glances over when he hears Steve say *"don't worry 'bout my friend over there, he's an anxious fella"* and sees two sandy headed kids blinking up at them. He rubs a hand over his mouth and sends his second prayer in an hour to keep these kids from feeling Steve's fallout.

Sitting with these kids, Ryan and Tailor, while Steve carefully gave them instructions to help him make a bomb was not exactly what Billy would call a successful Monday. He's sure Max is waiting at the church by now, pissy face cemented in place and ready to raise literal Hell about his whereabouts when Steve kicks his ankle under the table.

"Take 'em to the basement and don't come out til the noise is done."

Billy glares, lets a little bit of his contempt flow through it, then gets up and stomps off without saying a damn word. The kids follow like fuckin' ducklings. They look terrified while Steve's doing whatever the fuck he's doing above ground, includes a lot of shooting and blowing up noises, but they don't ask Billy to console them and for that he's truly thankful. It's one of his hang ups as a preacher, empathy *and* sympathy have never been his strongest suits. He's okay on his best days about spreading the word of God around but when it comes to relating to real life issues, like McKinnley's daughter shooting herself in the head and the sins that equates to, he can only give so much comfort through His words.

Billy helps the kids out of the cellar and arches an eyebrow at a fuckin' helicopter downed and aflame in the field. He scoffs when Steve smiles and waves at the kids, starts walking to the camaro and plucks a cigarette from his pocket.

"What, you didn't like that?" Steve asks, award winning smile still in place.

"Course not. Put those kids in danger." Steve sighs and rolls his neck like he's seeking askance from the Lord above. He gets in the car instead of saying anything to Billy.

Billy's done. He's done with this life, with Steve, with anything that could ever hurt him like that again. He's tired of bullshit games that he can never win and he's tired of being tired. He's tired of wishing that Steve would be different with him. Tired of thinking about Max and her future. Tired of leading by example. He wants better, deserves better after all, doesn't he?

"We are who we are, Hargrove." Steve says, leaning out the window and giving Billy a loaded look.

Billy refuses to look at him as he starts walking the long driveway to the road. He goes to see Will.

There's a loud discussion happening at the Byers' place as Billy pulls him up the front steps and brings himself closer and closer to the door. He rings the doorbell and puts his hands in his pockets while he waits. Hopper opens the door with a mildly intimidating look before sighing deeply and pushing the door wide open for Billy.

"You just missed dinner." Hopper says. It's not exactly unwelcoming yet Billy still feels chagrined.

"Ah, sorry. Was havin' truck issues." Billy smiles at Joyce as they pass the dining area. She waves at him with her wine glass to her lips and then turns back to listen in to whatever her son Jonathan was saying. He noticed Nancy Wheeler sitting to Jonathan's left, giving him a real tepid look while whisking her fork through mashed potatoes.

Yeah. After Steve he wasn't real surprised that she had been put in his path as well. God gave challenges and all. The last time he'd seen her she had a broken nose and a gun pointed at his boyfriend's face. Ex-boyfriend. They were only fifteen and fighting monsters of a different kind at the time. She tips her chin at him and he moves his gaze away after. God forgives but Billy doesn't forget. Says a mental prayer as apology and keeps moving behind Hopper.

The stairs up to Will's room, renovated attic and all, are narrow and pretty loud. Will's got his television turned up pretty loud, obnoxious laugh tracks mocking his way up. Hopper knocks twice and waits for

Will's soft voice before he opens the door and announces Billy's presence. Billy hasn't seen Will since he was real little and can't stand the idea that the kid is in his early twenties now. He got to watch Max grow, got to show her how to work the ropes of adulthood in the worst way possible and now he's here to give adult advice in the name of God. It feels a little bit like a farce, like a joke his family has made for thousands of years from the first church to the one Billy now lives in. It's in his blood.

Will looks so excited that he's here, bounces off his bed and folds his hands in front of himself all while talking a mile a minute. Hopper closes the door and stomps back down the stairs to leave them their privacy Billy guesses. Will always had a bobble head, he'd thought it was because of the bowl cut but even now with his hair shorter on the sides and longer on top he still has those bobble head features. He invites Billy to sit down in the only other chair in the room and sits on the corner of his bed to face him.

"Um, I don't. Yeah, I don't really know how to say this." He sighs, grips the extra fabric around his knees until his knuckles turn white then looks at Billy. Breaks his heart, this kid with his sad eyes and sad face and sad sad sad history. He refuses to look at Will's wrists to see the scars, the proof of his sin, and instead focuses on keeping his breathing even.

"Can start anywhere you want. Talk about your day, your weekend, anythin'." It seems to only relax Will slightly. Billy takes it for a small mercy.

"I know. Um, okay, I know what I did was *really* bad." He sighs again, rubs a hand over the back of his neck. "It's a sin. A really bad one."

Billy doesn't say anything. Doesn't think he has to. It'd only be restating the obvious and wouldn't make Will feel any better.

"But I can't-" He cuts himself off when his voice breaks. "I don't want my mom to have to pay for my sin."

"Will, do you believe in God?" Billy asks calmly, keeps his face blank when Will snaps his head up with squinted eyes.

“What? Of course I do.”

“Then you know that God is forgiving for those who earn it.” Will bites his lip and mulls it over for a second. “I know you work hard with our church. I hear your prayers louder than anyone else’s.”

“That’s. That’s another thing I wanted to talk to you about.” Will sighs again. “I’ve been, uh, well every night I say my prayers. I talk to God.”

“Sure you do.” Billy confirms, makes himself sound like he means it because if God won’t answer for him then fine but don’t fuck with the kids. They have more to lose from a false prophet than Billy does.

“He talks back.” Will rushes out to say. “Not like in direct sentences but there’s always *something*.”

“Right.” Billy says. “You’re right.”

“He hasn’t been talking back to me and I just want to know if it’s.” He clears his throat. “If it’s cause what I did.”

Billy needs to make an important decision here. He needs to reassure Will that God’s a busy man and can’t always make time for him without making Will feel like shit for needing Divine reassurance. But he’s also cluing in to the fact that maybe it’s not just him that can’t get even a reaction from God. Maybe there’s something wrong, maybe God’s done with Hawkins all together, maybe maybe maybe.

“You’re not saying anything.” Will whispers.

“Will, I want you to know that you’re doing your best.” Billy starts. “Want you to think about all those rough spots you’ve hit since you’ve come back home and how His guidance has helped you do that. Remember those things He’s said and shown to you.”

“But they’re still crank calling my mom’s job! They’re still, still following Jonathan and Nancy around asking ab-bout *zombie boy* and I just don’t want them to have to *pay for my sins*! I’m so sorry if it’s selfish but they shouldn’t-”

“That’s actually pretty selfless, Will.” Billy says gently. “Will the

Wise, right? You're still him. Still wise. You made a mistake, everyone does at some point or another, but you still chose Him over yourself didn't you? Still choose to talk to Him every night. People might treat you some type of way now but your maker knows the truth of your soul. No one can judge you but Him."

Will sat staring at his shoes scuffing the carpet for a long minute before nodding once and looking up at him with a genuine smile.

"You're right, I'm sorry for getting excited." He took a deep breath and then smiled again. "Thanks, Preacher."

Somehow Billy avoids the God not responding conversation and doesn't see Nancy on his way out. Challenges and mercies. He's walking up to his truck, keys in hand and ready to slide into the ignition, when something jerks him off his feet. He lands with a rough grunt and feels strange. There's a vibrating feeling running along his skin, like a current of energy ready to be of use if Billy'd just let it in. It asks him, pleads with him, demands from him that he let it in. He counts six breaths in and three breaths out before he's blacking out in front of the chief of police's fuckin' house.

When he blinks his eyes open it's like no time has passed at all. He feels fine, nothing other than a bruise forming on his ass and lower back. He stands up, dusts himself off and slides into his truck. Hawkins always was a strange town.

Billy didn't tell Max that Lucas was coming with his parents. He felt anxious when the Sinclairs first entered the church but Max's red faced glare was enough to quell it. He was going to hear Holy Hell about it later but he could laugh now, could chuckle under his breath and read the threats that she mouthed across the organs.

There's more people, surprisingly, though he guesses the good Sinclair family name brought that too. Max forced him to pick something to speak about that was relevant and well worded. The group quiets when he asks for it, the echo of his voice rings in his

ears and Max gives him a worried look before she blinks her gaze away. He feels amazing, invigorated even. Seeing the new old faces in the church struck something deep inside him and he's almost sure of what God's plan for him is right in this moment. The look in the eyes of the people who are not only hearing his words but praying by them is something he hopes to keep forever. It's better, this, being good at something good.

He makes his time with Murray and avoids Holly kicking sand at him. He even gets to watch Max and Lucas awkwardly talk for ten minutes before Erica calls him away. Max gives real smiles when Lucas talks, Billy almost can't remember the last time he saw a real smile from her. Maybe California. Maybe Louisiana. At any rate, he thinks he's allowed a moment of silence from the masses that be. He's just sitting behind the wheel of his truck when he takes a deep breath in and nearly falls face first into the dash when his hands don't settle on the steering wheel. The good day is washed away near instantly.

Steve pulls up in the camaro next to Billy's steering wheel-less truck.

"Say, where's a fella like you been all my little life?" He drawls, pushes his Ray Bans down his nose and leans out the window to grin in Billy's face.

"Harrington-"

"C'mon, B, all's you gotta do is come with me." His grin grows with Billy's glare.

"I don't and I won't. Got important things goin' on here. Can't fuck 'round with you and lose everything again."

Steve's grin goes feral. The light in his eyes turns dark and cold.

"Ah, ain't that right. S'pose there're souls to save and all." He turns his face to the road and pushes his glasses back up. "I found Tommy."

Then the camaro is shifting into gear and with a squeal of tires Steve's gone. Billy's steering wheel is atop the light post. Fifteen feet in the fuckin' air.

He's plagued with thoughts of Tommy for the next few hours. Smiles

in Max's face when she gives praise over his strong words and use of vocabulary. Still gives him shit about Lucas, which is fine until she mentions seeing Steve whip past. They have a quiet dinner, clean the kitchen together and then go their separate ways for the night. It's their routine, ingrained by many harsh lessons on how families are responsible and respectful.

Billy knows Karen Wheeler prefers a pinot grigio in her right and a chardonnay in her left. That while she never strays into hard liquor outside of cosmos on girl's nights the drinking is a near constant thing. She brushes her teeth with wine, eats her cereal with wine, caught three DUIs before Mike was born because she couldn't put the bottle down. Deadbeat husband who works a plain job, supports a plain life in a plain suburban town, smacks her around like she likes when they're fuckin' because it's the only time he really lets go and gives her what she wants. She came to him when he first opened the church doors and begged for the Lord to forgive her for wanting to fuck the Preacher. Billy gave her a mint, a smile and an invitation to his sermon on Sunday.

Michael is a gangly and awkward kid. Billy doesn't remember much of his sister, Nancy, which is a flat out lie because Billy remembers everything about Mike's older sister. He remembers watching Steve moon over her for what felt like forever. Remembers sitting outside the same church with Steve and Carol, watching Tommy make creations for games in the sand while Steve's eyes were trained on the slightly sunburnt shoulders of one Nancy Wheeler leaving the church behind her mother. Her mother had been extra thankful for his father back then, too, but Nancy had always turned her nose up at them.

Sitting in their dining room, surrounded by kitschy decor and Mike's stupid pouty face, Billy feels sixteen all over again. Ted talks and talks about stocks and bonds, nothing Billy has ever shown interest in but wills himself to keep an inviting face because the Wheeler's are

the only recurring family to the church. Billy's got to suck up to keep his mass around, apparently. The conversation thankfully dies when Karen brings out one of her casserole creations and Billy finds himself glad he hasn't eaten yet today only if it makes the food more edible if he's starving. Mike seems to commiserate with him by spearing what looks like a piece of broccoli and making a frog face.

"Oh! I saw Joyce Byers at the general store today." Karen says it conversationally but the viciousness of her fork says otherwise.

Billy knows the story. Knows why the Wheelers hate anything about the Byers family. Mike's face drops, goes carefully blank and he sets his fork down. Billy prays he doesn't say anything to create the fight they both know it will. Karen won't ever forgive Will. Billy doesn't think it's her place to ask for forgiveness from a child but he's also not going to make it his place to politic her parenting when she's so devout to the church.

But all he can think about is Will's face when they talked about God the other night.

He makes it through the dinner and thanks Karen profusely when she hands him a container of leftovers he's never going to touch again. There's rustling in the brush on the other side of his truck when he finally makes it outside. His gut feeling tells him to freeze, to listen and watch. It's probably one of the high school kids lost from the second night of the Mascot Brawl Parade but Billy still hesitates. There's an echoey type of screech, more clicks than a single sound, that makes him shiver with nerves and then it's gone. The feeling leeches away from him and he continues down the drive while checking over his shoulders all the way.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

me: most of this is written so! consistent updates!

me: lol oops

hope the length of this (almost 11k) makes up for my posting misjudgment lol

warnings for: guns, homicide, Neil, vague dissociation, Martin Brenner and all that he's done, let me know if anything else needs to be up here (:

Billy's out searching for a ghost in the only bar in town. Nearly expects his old man to be propped up on the bar, engaging the crowd of suckers circling him, going on and on and on about society 'these days'. Instead he's given an icy look from every man in the joint and an already sweaty beer waiting for him at the bar. It takes two minutes before someone's sliding into the seat beside him. He holds his breath and prays it's not fuckin Murray.

"You're a bit of an illusion, Preacher." The voice is soft with mirth and when Billy flicks his eyes over he sees the man's face is close to something Billy would call joyful. "You see I keep hearing such high praise about the Hargrove church but I've yet to have met a Hargrove in the flesh. Well, I suppose until now."

There's something wrong about him though. His eyes hold a steeliness just under the surface, his jaw is clenched like it's waiting to rip itself open and present thousands of teeth. Is he meant to feel like a threat or is he the prey? The man is polished, all the way to his shoes, exudes a kinda class and money that Billy's only caught glimpses of in real life. He brings the near empty bottle to his lips instead of replying, wipes the sweat from the glass on his thighs and stares resolutely at the back wall behind the bar.

"Not a talker, huh? I'll get right to it then. Before your father died - my condolences by the way, I've heard he was a very Holy man." Billy swigs from the bottle again. "We were in talks about trading

land for other assets. The property the church rests on was to be mine.”

“Wasn’t anything about that in the paperwork with the lawyers.” The lawyers had been the major hold up in Billy’s endeavors. His father had worded things so specifically Billy was almost sure it was just to spite him. One last dangling carrot in his memory. He wasn’t allowed help when he put the church in his name, he was to do it alone as per Neil Hargrove’s wishes, keep it solely in the family like it had always been. Once the lawyers caught wind that Max was still around they pressed the brakes and then there had been three weeks of nuclear phone calls that Billy still winces over.

“Because those contracts were never signed by your father.” The man says breezily.

“Then why even say anything?” Billy turns to look at him now. Can feel the snarl rising in his throat, lips curling to ease its way out. “I’m not my dad and I quite like my church.”

“Certainly. Though I do have to say your step mother loved receiving the money for the land after your departure from Hawkins. She visited my office enough to ensure payment and then disappeared. I’d like what I’m owed.”

Susan never said that. Never told anyone about any money she’d gotten from Neil or otherwise. Just packed them up and took them to her mother’s where they watched out both of the women’s last years. There was \$76 for Max to inherit. Susan didn’t have any savings or bonds, never paid attention to stock. If she’d gotten any money it was never used or kept. Billy would know, Max was still too young and grieving so he had to take care of the adult decisions. He’d seen Susan’s bank statements and debt pile up. He knows.

Something isn’t adding up.

“Property was never in her name, she wasn’t legally next of kin and he made damn sure that no one but me could touch the church. Whatever money you gave to her only fucked yourself over.”

The man pulls an envelope from his coat, places it on the tacky bar

and taps it twice. It's thick and has his last name scribed across the otherwise blank front. Billy swallows roughly but keeps his face blank.

"I'm afraid that's not correct. This might enlighten you though. Here's my business card, in case you want to talk about conditions." Then the cocky bastard tucks the card in the breast pocket of Billy's coat, stands fluidly and walks calmly from the bar.

Guess he can cross meeting Martin Brenner off his never wanted to do list.

Billy buys a bottle of top shelf whisky, grabs the thick envelope and drives back to the church. All the lights are off so Max must be asleep, there's a plate wrapped for him on the stove but he's not even hungry. He sits in the darkened church and carefully places the envelope on the pew seat beside him before screwing open the whisky and drinking like a man on fire. Doesn't even care that he spills down his chin as he's sure this church is no virgin to spilt whisky.

He thinks about his father, how wretched he was when his mother left them and can hear echoes of the names he shouted about her. Thinks about the belt whippings he's received, some for actual punishment and others to make an example out of him. Holy man Billy's ass, his daddy probably went to the lowest level of Hell. He's prayed for it, multiple times, that the Devil would walk Earth just to take his dad back where he belongs.

He's sure there was nothing sketchy with the paperwork. He spent days on end reading over every letter, every agreement and contract and judge's notes. The church was entirely his. It was all in the paperwork. Lawyers don't give a shit about a dead man's wishes, just the fine ink. That's what they told him. The only way they got paid is if the job was done the right way. He may have been drunk more then than he is now but he's not a damn fool. This wasn't a rush decision, everything had to be upheld.

So why does it feel so wrong now? Is the right way a roundabout way of erasing binding contracts? Is there a way he can find that out? He looks at the envelope then drinks again.

And Susan? *Susan*? Hiding money? Had she ever done something that brave in her life? He's pretty sure she thought off shore banking was only a wallstreet thing. She couldn't even balance her own checkbooks, so Billy did it for her. Brenner had said he had never met Neil so how the fuck is any of this actually real? If something had been signed there would have to be witnesses of their meeting. Susan never mentioned his dad doing shady shit but of course she never mentioned anything about his dad. She never talked about their marriage, the kind of man Neil was to her, the kind of person she loved from him. She recognized the end of the line and jumped from the train the first chance she got.

He grabs the envelope off the pew, head spinning with whisky and his thoughts when the church doors open behind him and he hears someone stumble in with a curse. When he registers it's someone wearing a bucket hat and a trench coat he jumps to his feet and makes his presence known.

"Oh shit, occupado?" A woman's voice says. "You saying your nighty-night prayers? Jesus know what pajamas you wear?" She cackles at herself and plops down on the first pew she reaches.

"Are you drunk?" Is all he can think to ask.

"High on life!" She crows with laughter. She takes the hat off and Billy can see she's blonde with a bright smile. She has a kind face, sets him at ease with her grin and pointy nose. She doesn't seem harmless, Billy's sure she could maim him within seconds if he really considers it. But she seems kind. "You drinking alone or do you plan to share, Preacher?"

"Who even are you?" He still hands her the bottle.

"Robin Buckley at your service!" She says with a very shitty British accent, tips him off with the bottle then drinks for a full five seconds. "Ohhh you have good taste. Didn't expect a Holy man to stock up on good shit."

"Have to wash the sins someway." Billy sighs.

"Am I interrupting? You can keep cleansing." She leers before giving

a howl of laughter and leaning back. "You look sad, Preacher."

She's the strangest woman he's ever met.

"You're the strangest woman I've ever met. Is this a dream?" He snatches the envelope off the floor where he'd dropped it and shoves it into his pocket.

"I'm from a different time." She snickers. "You drink alone in church often?"

"Don't drown in your own vomit." He says and stomps out of the hall. He can hear her singing trash pop songs til the sun comes up.

She's still there when he comes downstairs, not having slept a wink and in desperate need of caffeine. Max is poking Robin's cheek with a crucifix when he enters the hall. He barks a laugh and quiets himself when Robin jerks herself up from the pew looking disoriented and pale.

"Is there a morning prayer? Blessed be thy day?" She croaks out, smiles at Max's glare and then looks at Billy. "Slumber party rules say you have to cook breakfast for guests, darling." Bats her eyes real cute.

Billy snorts and walks off. He laughs over Max's indignant noises.

He makes eggs and toast but lets Max make the coffee. She's got it to a science now, the perfect blend of everything Billy needs to get his brain moving again. Max doesn't speak to Robin, acts like she's not there like the little asshole she is, and starts up about her stupid coworkers who steal from the deposit bags. It's a fast food joint, Billy sees the issue and still doesn't care.

"You know anything about Martin Brenner?" He asks and Max goes still. Huh.

"Just, uh, just that he owns almost all the farmlands now. For his big science company. Energy? I think he works in energy." She's not telling the whole truth, won't meet his eyes and bites her lip real hard til it bleeds.

“Uh huh, what else?” Robin’s watching them like one watches tennis but Billy’s not gonna let that stop him right now.

“Look, it’s not my place to say-“

“‘Cause he found me at the bar last night. Had a lot to say about how he owns this land.”

“He what?” Max says quietly. He’s almost about to thank her for not screaming but purses his lips and pulls the envelope from his pocket instead.

“Gave me this, too.” He sets the envelope in front of the three of them. “Haven’t opened it.”

“That’s impossible right? Right?” Now her voice is creeping up in hysteria. “Please say something.”

“I don’t know.” He sighs, scrubs a hand over his eyes and counts down from ten. Does it three times. Max and Robin are both watching him.

Max snatches the envelope up and spreads the contents out without reading anything. They do this together. That’s what they decided when he was sixteen. They do it together. Consequences be damned they were each gonna have someone at their back when push came to shove.

They say nothing, Robin included, as they go through bank statements of money transfers. All of them approved by Brenner and S.Mayfield. There’s photographs of Susan and Brenner shaking hands and smiling, Brenner’s company logo behind them and they’re all dated on the back. Two days after Billy’s dad died, three days before they left town. Something inside him cracks a little bit. But the last page is a contesting of the will. Susan and Brenner were working to contest Neil’s will and alter it to take Billy out of the equation completely.

“Billy, I didn’t-“ Max cuts herself off with a cough, like holding back her angry tears is choking her.

“I know. I know you didn’t know. It’s not a blame situation.” He feels

numb. Like there's static lacing across his brain and skin.

"We can always kill him." Robin suggests, getting toast crumbs all over the papers.

"No." Billy says sternly.

"Who the fuck even are you?" Max nearly shouts.

Robin sticks her hand out, there's jam on her fingers. "Robin. Nice to meet you, screechy."

"So what do we do?" Max ignores Robin and turns to Billy. "There has to be something we do."

He puts the business card on the table.

"We talk conditions."

"Woah, no, hold on." Robin says, slurps her coffee just to make Max frown at her before leveling an assessing look at Billy. "You know nothing about this dude and you wanna trap yourself in his game? Do some research first, Cowboy."

"If we want to make a game plan shouldn't we know all of our options?" Max asks, gives Robin a look like she thinks she's stupid

"How do you know his options aren't traps as well?" Robin shoots back, purses her lips out like she's gonna blow a raspberry then shakes her head in Max's face.

"Where would we even start?" Max asks. "We haven't been around here in years, there's no way any of our old connections-"

"We start with Hopper." Billy says. "He trusted you and I think he might trust me a little bit. We start with him."

"He barely trusted me and I was a child! He was mostly around to protect us when-" She cuts herself off with a frigid look at Robin. "At any rate, he probably won't help."

"If there's one thing I know about Hopper it's that he hates the

bullshit in this town. Brenner brings the bullshit to this town. Think we can earn some brownie points for cleaning up the streets.”

Max thins her lips but says nothing. Billy takes it as a win. The fight she gives about hanging out with Robin on her only day off is nearly catastrophic but in the end Billy pulls his signature move by slamming the door in her face and leaving. He'll deal with the fallout later.

Hopper's office is quaint. Too little for what Billy was expecting but he guesses small town budgets don't include luxury in the 21st century even when you are the chief of police. He brought Billy to his office then left to find decent coffee without asking any questions about the impromptu meeting. Surely Hopper is a busy man, lotsa teens going crazy still from the mascot fights but Billy figured Hopper owed him one from the meeting with Will and they mutually decided this was his one. There's picture frames on the desk, one bright pink with the name "Emily" in yellow and white letters across the top of it. It holds a picture of a little girl with a blue bandana being held by Hopper. They have matching smiles and noses. The other pictures are of a different kid. A kid Billy knows but doesn't. A purple frame, the name "El" in green letters, a shaved head and bruised eyes. The kid looks intense in the pictures, like she's solving algebra every time she looks at the camera.

Something inside Billy is desperate to know more about El. Wants to know if she's Max's age now, if she ever made it out of Hawkins, if the monsters ate her alive yet. It's clawing at his skin to find answers, to find her location, to find Hopper and *force* him to give answers. He pukes in the trash can next to the desk and sighs when it's coffee colored. He feels faint, like the ground is rushing up at him or he's melting down into it. He starts counting his breaths but nothing changes, the intense feeling swells and pops like a blood vessel gone septic when Hopper opens the door with two mugs in hand.

He doesn't say anything about the trash can or how Billy is obviously acting strange in his office. He levels a look at Billy and sips from his mug, cracks his knuckles then folds his hands together.

"I'm glad you came to see me. I wanted to talk to you about something with the church." He doesn't sound mad or happy and Billy's already sitting on the edge of his seat.

"Does it have to do with Martin Brenner?" He asks.

Hopper freezes, stares deep into his eyes for a long moment before squinting and leaning back in his chair.

"No, it doesn't. But now I'm interested in what you have to say first."

So Billy pulls the envelope out and slides it across the desk, lets Hopper look at all the papers before he blinks back up to Billy.

"I don't see the issue." He grunts. "Paperwork's all in your name, not your fault your con-artist stepmom got every penny's worth from the first asshole that offers it."

"Yeah. 'S what I thought too. Look at that last paper." Hopper gives him a flat look so Billy yanks it from his hand and flips it over. "Someone's been practicing my signature."

"Look, Brenner isn't the most stand-up man in all of Hawkins." Billy sighs deeply. "There's nothing much that I can do about paperwork, Hargrove. He threatens you or Maxine, steps foot on the property outside of church hours, follows you around, I can take care of that. For now I would just be keeping a close eye on the bastard."

Billy will never know how he can so blindly put his trust in men more powerful than he is. He's done it since before his father died. Always listened and believed that someone would help if he just asked for it. It hasn't worked before and it sure isn't working now. The thing inside him growls with his anger. God has practically abandoned him, his father was a stupid fucking piece of shit, every other man who claims to be able to help always fails him before they can even do anything for him. Rinse repeat.

"Chief, I ain't asking you to arrest him. I'm asking for any

information you might know to get him to back off me.” Hopper says nothing, just rubs a hand over his fuzzy mouth. “Alright, fine, you don’t wanna help me. Ain’t gonna beg for it. What’d you wanna talk to me about, then?”

He knows that Hopper can hear and see his bad mood settling over him. Doesn’t stop him from making it worse.

“I want to talk to you about Karen Wheeler and how you’re allowing her to push Joyce from the church.”

“What do you mean?” Billy’s eyebrows furrow meanly.

“What I mean is Joyce has been coming to that church since her folks took her to listen to your grandpa. Must mean something that Karen starts bringin’ her family around and Joyce hasn’t been, huh?”

Billy thinks about watching them at the church a few weeks ago. Joyce had looked a bit strained by the time everyone packed up all their shit and left. Billy just assumed it was the heat and Murray. Now he thinks he might’ve fucked up by letting Karen get all comfortable.

“Yeah. Yeah all right. I’ll talk to Karen.”

Hopper squints at him then nods once. Conversation finished.

When he steps outside from the police station the camaro is parked next to his truck. He’s certainly not in the mood to deal with Steve’s shit, not when he’s seething for blood from two people now. Karen Wheeler is a fucking cunt. Joyce may not approve of Billy, well not of sixteen year old Billy, but she never treated him differently. Always acted motherly, never talked about his body like the other moms did, and Billy was God damned if Karen was gonna take advantage of his slight weak spot for Joyce like that.

Max leans between the seats to the window of the camaro and yells his name.

“What the fuck is this?” He asks, glare pinning Steve in place. The smile Steve’s giving him slips off his face real quick. Good.

“Caught up with Maxipad and her new friend here.” Billy’s eyes focus on the worried glance Robin is currently giving him. “Got to talking and I think I have a solution to your little Brenner rat problem.”

“You got such a big fuckin’ mouth.” He accuses Max. She gives him a sweet smile with a small shrug.

“Take any help we can get, right? Betters the community.” She says all cute.

“I gotta talk to Karen Wheeler before we fuckin’ do anything else.” Max gives him a weird look but Steve shrugs his shoulders.

“Get in and let’s go then, Preacher.”

He doesn’t allow himself to think about how normal it feels to have Steve driving them around again.

“I know someone who might be able to help with that.” Steve says like any connection he had here Bill didn’t also have.

“Who?” Billy asks and Max snorts a laugh. He turns to watch her curl her lips in and shake her head with bright eyes. “*Who?*”

“Well, let’s just get through the whole talking with the Wheelers thing.” Steve says, smiles real big when Billy grumbles under his breath.

“Oh, I am so connecting the dots right now.” Robin’s got an amused sort of lilt to her voice.

“What dots?” Steve asks right as Billy says “you’re not connecting shit.”

Robin just laughs and pats Steve’s shoulder. Bitch.

There’s no sign of anyone but Karen and Holly at the house which Billy takes as a damn blessing. It means he can hopefully manipulate

this whole situation into something better. He's gonna address the Will thing, the church and then escape before Karen really gets her wits about her. He's fucked before he can even get to the door.

"Preacher!" Karen coos, straightens her shoulders to push her breasts out like she always has. Makes him nauseous honestly but he grits his teeth and smiles real big.

The house is some retro relic, green wallpaper with teal blue accents and bright yellow chairs. Aesthetically Karen has always been the perfect housewife. He feels out of place in such a warm space, like he's scuffing the carpet with muddy boots. She makes this awful herbal tea that he barely chokes down a few sips of before clearing his throat. She waits him out with a patient smile and the thing inside him comes alive.

"I want to talk to you about Joyce Byers." He holds a breath in when her face drops. "Jim Hopper told me she's been feelin' rejected from the church. You know we keep a welcome for everyone in Hawkins."

"That bitch-"

"Don't go name calling, Karen." Billy says firmly. "I may have only been sixteen but I know well enough what happens here behind closed doors."

"Why I-"

"I'm not here to judge you." He placates and she takes a deep breath. "What you do is what you do. But what you do to people in my church is what I want to focus on."

"You think she deserves to be saved?" Karen asks incredulously.

"It's not about what I think." The thing inside him is snapping it's jaw, ready to jump at the moment Billy allows it to. "I think you need to forgive for your own sake." He hears the echo in the word 'forgive', feels something settle inside of him. "Forgive." He demands again.

Karen blinks and looks at him with wide eyes.

“You’re right, oh, you’re absolutely right.” She says quietly, blinks down to her hands. “I’ve been so wretched.”

She’s already on the phone with Joyce as Billy’s walking out the door and into the sun. Steve’s sitting on the hood of the car, passenger door propped open with Max leaning out to say something to him. They’re smiling. It sets something off inside him, creates this tension that he didn’t want. Steve’s never one to stay. Or maybe Billy was never the one that stayed. Either way they were never going to last, they knew it damn well before California.

Seeing it feels like *deja vu*, feels like puzzle pieces fitting together seamlessly. He makes a bitchy comment and they get their asses back on the road.

Max and Robin are sitting in the backseat with matching bored looks. Max has a ponytail on the top of her head which makes her hair settle around her like a red wave. She stole Steve’s sunglasses at the last gas station and keeps popping her bubble gum really loudly and pointedly at him. It’d be funny if it wasn’t so damn annoying. Robin smokes her third joint in an hour, keeps bringing up random mind bogglers like *are zebras white with black stripes or black with white stripes* and *when is a door not a door*. Steve’s getting a little fed up with it honestly, Billy can tell. He’s getting a little twitchy, keeps switching his hands on the wheel like he’s going to say something and then restrains himself. Billy hears the hitch in his breath when he breathes, lips pursing and eyebrows furrowing and then his face will go slack, his shoulders will slump and he’ll roll his wrist when he switches hands again. Billy can’t stop watching him even if he actually tries.

Steve seems to pick up on the extra attention, goes rigid for a long few seconds then grabs the pack of cigarettes tucked away in the visor. It’s where Billy used to keep his smokes when the camaro was still his. Humbles him a little to see Steve so comfortable in his car.

“You wanna stop staring at me?” He says like a moody bitch. Billy holds in a laugh and pulls his own smokes from his breast pocket. His lighter still has Steve’s initials carved into the back of it.

He lets the cigarette hang loose between his lips, rolls his head on the

shoulder of the seat to make solid eye contact with Steve. Billy watches him stare at his mouth, sees his eyes get darker and his gaze grow sharper when Billy bites the filter and drawls out *well all right then* and turns back to the road.

Max pops her fuckin bubble gum.

He regrets not asking where the fuck they were going when they pull up on the Indiana State University campus. Steve's been ignoring him for the last hour of the drive, actually turned the radio on to end any kind of conversation. It's dark out now, hours spent watching field after field fly by, and there's a slight chill to the air. Something doesn't feel right, maybe it's just him but he feels on edge. Like he's close to an edge of a cliff with no sight of the bottom. The face that meets them when Steve cop knocks on a dorm door makes him realize why he felt the vicious apprehension.

"No fucking way." Dustin says, looking Billy up and down. "Hi, Max. Random blonde stranger. Fuck you." The last part is, surprisingly, directed at Steve.

"Yeah, man, we can hash our differences out but I need your help first."

"That's real rich, Steven, thank you for returning any of the phone calls or texts I've sent you during the last year. Thank you for just showing up on my door and demanding my help, Steven, really, I feel so honored."

"Alright, I don't have time for this shit." Billy grumbles, steps away from the door but Steve reaches out and stops him without looking away from Dustin.

"Nah, look, Dustin, there's some real code red shit going down in Hawkins right now-"

The door is yanked open entirely to show Lucas and Mike standing behind Dustin. Each of them wearing a similarly disapproving look. Until Lucas sees Max, then he looks at a loss. Max takes a step back

towards Billy.

“What, uh, what are you doing here?” Mike asks, gives Billy a considering look before blinking between the other’s faces.

Steve opens his mouth but Billy beats him to it.

“What do you know about Martin Brenner?”

The boys share a secret look before settling their gazes on Billy.

“What’s the code red shit?” Lucas asks.

“Losing the church to Brenner.” Billy says quietly.

Mike nods, maybe not the only bobble head of the group, and waves them into the room. It’s set up for two, from the looks and what Billy remembers he’d place good money on this being Dustin and Lucas’ room. It’s quiet while everyone finds a place to sit, Billy stays standing by the door with his arms crossed.

“We’re not at liberty to say what happened that summer.” Dustin says, glares at Billy and then sighs. “We signed government contracts.”

“Like a *lot* of contracts.” Lucas agrees.

“But what we can say is that Brenner is ruthless.” Mike says, rubs a hand over his mouth. “He’ll go to war if he thinks the cause is worthy enough. Had a whole summer of him chasing after us.” He rolls his eyes at Dustin’s squawk. “What? It’s the truth! That wasn’t part of the NDAs.”

“No, but it’ll bring up too many questions.” Max says quietly, ignores Billy’s gaze when he turns to her with his brows raised.

“Okay. So all you can give me is bullshit?” He asks the room at large. Robin gives him a commiserative look and he hates that shit too. He has to pinch the bridge of his nose and breathe deep. “Alright. I’m just gonna get a breather.”

He walks outside and to the camaro, leans against the hood and

stares up into the night sky. Starts really questioning what the fuck is happening here, is this part of God's plan too? Another test in a long line of already traumatic events? He feels restless in his own skin, the feeling creeping around in his brain and fogging his thoughts. There's something wrong with him, something inside of him that holds a power he's too weak to harvest. It's dwelling now, in the depths of him, waiting to be put to use completely. He feels a proud purr inside his mind when he thinks about how easy it was to convince Karen, thinks about how he sounds when he's standing in front of his congregation and giving them the word of God. He's not sure if this power is good or evil, ignores the nudges it gives him every now and again but recognizes it as a threat. The threat of how easily it could overpower him.

Steve comes crashing out of the hall what feels like seconds later and sighs when they make eye contact.

"Wanna go for a walk?" He asks and Billy can't say no, just juts his chin out and steps in line beside him.

They walk quietly under the well lit sidewalks on campus. Time seems to slow and expand as does the earth below them. He can take deep breaths without feeling like his chest is going to cave in and Steve just keeps his gaze forward. By the time Billy realizes something is different they've walked out of the well lit path and into the woods. It's snowing. They're walking evenly paced while nearly brushing shoulders and it's snowing. Little flurries of frost dust the air but just seconds ago it was a nice summer night. Steve doesn't seem to notice, still hasn't looked at anything but what's in front of him, has an almost bored expression on his face. Billy reaches out a hand to catch the flurries, brushes his fingers through his palm only for them to come away a pale grey.

Not snow. Ash. It's ash fluttering through the air, swirling in the breeze. He stops walking and listens to the trees moving with the wind. They give out a slight creak as they sway and it's so close to the noise he heard the other night. What if Hell isn't just in Hawkins but the entire state? The whole country? He blinks when Steve waves a hand in front of his eyes. They're still on the well lit sidewalk, the air clear and humid around them.

"You with me?" Steve asks quietly and Billy just nods once already forgetting what he'd seen, like a fog being lifted.

They go back to the dorm room where Mike informs him that Brenner isn't a faith leaning kind of man.

"He prefers hard facts over what ifs, it's something my mom used to bitch about all the time." He sighs. "If you can make a deal with the devil to prove his faith maybe he'll back off."

It gives him a lot to think about on the drive back to Hawkins. Max bitches about being in the car for hours again and forces them to pull over at some dirt motel a few miles out from the college. She snags a room key from the desk and gives Billy a loaded look before closing the door behind Robin.

So. They're in some cheap motel, Max and Robin three rooms down and the tension is boiling between them. They're sitting leaning against the two headboards of the beds, tv off and noise from outside leaking through the cracks. Steve's been watching him for the last five minutes with a contemplative look that Billy can't bear to see for very long.

"Are you ever gonna look at me again?" Steve says, the one light on the table between the beds casting a shadow on the furrow of his brow.

"Been lookin' right at you, don't start your shit." Billy grumbles, rolls his head on his neck and looks into Steve's eyes. Can't find the strength to blink his gaze away.

"Maybe you have been but it ain't been the right way." Steve sighs "Look at me like you hate me."

"Don't hate you." Billy whispers before he can stop himself, bites his lip at the admission and sighs when Steve's face shudders. "Lookin' at you like you're somethin' I lost, baby." He wishes he could say he was drunk, wishes more than anything that he didn't have to say

anything at all but it's out now.

He turns his face away from Steve to stare at the ceiling, roves his eyes over the lights flickering above the window. Steve sighs and there's rustling but Billy can't bring himself to look over again, hopes that he's just rolled over and that'll be it. He's proven wrong when Steve climbs into his lap, brings his wide palms up to hold both sides of Billy's face and just watches him. It's only instinct for Billy to drag his hands up the outsides of Steve's thighs until he's gripping his hips.

"I really did miss you, you gotta know that right? You gotta." Steve whispers, dips his chin and sighs against Billy's mouth when his fingers tighten. "Thought about you every day. Drives me crazy how you won't look at me."

"I'm looking at you right now, ain't I?" Billy whispers back, feels Steve's dick jump against his hip and grips his hips harder to pull him down tighter. "Can't look at anything but you like this, baby."

The sinfully sweet way Steve rolls his hips into Billy makes both their breaths catch, has Billy sliding his hands up Steve's back while Steve's sliding his hands to gently hold his throat. Billy gets his hands in Steve's hair, pulls until he makes a high pitch noise in the back of his throat and leans down over Billy more.

"You wanna stop?" Steve asks, lips brushing Billy's and it's insane how *not enough* it is.

He's not sure he wants to, is the thing. He knows they should. The thing inside of him is almost demanding it but it's easy to drown that out with the view of Steve breathing heavily over him. He hasn't been like this with someone since they ended things in California. Hasn't been with anyone but Steve his entire life. The thought makes him weary, brings a certain tiredness out in him but he can feel Steve's pulse when he rests a hand on his chest.

"Absolutely not." He rasps out and bites Steve's bottom lip when he smiles down at him.

Kissing Steve feels too much like coming home. Like a warm summer day after being cold for so long. Just an emptiness filled immediately

with such bright colors it's almost blinding. But that's always been Steve. That's always been their thing, burning bright and bitter. This feels sweet, feels like steps in the right direction. Whatever direction that may be. Steve leans back and Billy follows his mouth, grunts when Steve scratches up his back as he takes Billy's shirt off. They break apart and the shirt goes flying to the floor but Steve just stares at him, licks his lips when he makes eye contact again and dives back into kissing the breath right from Billy's lungs. Billy rolls his hips up right as Steve's rolling down and they gasp into each other's mouths for what feels like years. He finally gets his wits about him and starts tugging at Steve's shirt, pushes him back an inch to pull his pants down when Steve starts wiggling out of his shirt.

"God, fuck, missed you so much." Steve sighs, pulls his dick out and strokes it twice while looking Billy over. "Look so good laid out under me."

His words are like an embrace themselves and Billy's blood is pounding in his ears. He chokes out a *baby* when Steve lines their dicks up and thrusts, rubs his hands from Steve's rib cage to his ass and squeezes on a particularly rough thrust.

"Billy, fuck, Billy please." Steve moans, ducks his head down to kiss behind Billy's ear and whines when he squeezes his ass again.

"Always feel so good, baby." Billy says into his ear and grins when Steve whines.

It takes minutes, hours, days for them to come. Mess spread between their bellies and humid breath against skin. They don't say anything after and Steve leaves to the other bed.

Somehow Billy can't find the regret he'd expected.

The church is still standing when they get back into town. Billy doesn't say anything to Steve, hasn't since the night before. Swallows down the way the word 'baby' tastes in his mouth as he closes the door and watches the camaro speed down the dirt drive. There's an awkward silence between the three of them as they make their way

inside. Robin begs off to the attic, claims she thinks the air conditioning is broken and she's determined to fix it while Max gets ready for her shift. It's Billy who is at a loss, fumbling to find a game plan and his footing in his own safe space. He paces for half an hour, glances at the business card sitting by his phone and sighs.

Finally, he reaches out and dials the number.

"Brenner speaking." And Billy's breath is caught in his throat. Feels like his chest is going to collapse. Almost as soon as the feeling washes over him the thing inside him is quelling it, demanding him to stop acting like such a bitch.

"It's Hargrove." He grunts out.

"Oh yes, how wonderful. Thank you for calling me, Preacher." He sounds pleased. Cat and mouse. "Are you ready to talk terms?"

"I have a proposition to make, actually."

"Really? Well, let's hear it." The bastard actually chuckles.

"I have it on good authority that you're not a man of faith." There's a sharp inhale but Billy continues before Brenner can say anything. "If I can make you a man of faith with one Sunday then I get to keep the church. If not, we finish the paperwork and it's all yours."

Brenner chuckles for a minute, clearly thinking it over and undoubtedly underestimating Billy.

"It's, what, Tuesday?" He pauses then sighs. "Sure, Preacher, I'd love to see how you could change my faith. I love a good challenge." Brenner chuckles one more time before the line dies.

There. Done. Now he's just got to figure out what the fuck he's gonna do Sunday.

Robin comes downstairs that night wearing a shirt that cheerily

exclaims 'friends don't let friends live in Indiana' that makes Max smile into her plate. He thinks they've finally warmed up to each other then questions why the fuck he even cares. Robin isn't the first floater that Billy's given a place of refuge to but he thinks he's starting to grow attached to her sarcastic manner. Max leaves them talking a half ass game plan at the dining table, well late into the night but neither of them exactly ready to call it that.

"So what's up with Steve?" She asks, the chipped nail polish on her thumb catching his attention. She raises her hands when he glares though. "Hey, I am full on girl on girl action over here. Just seems like there's one hell of a story there and you know I love juicy deets."

"Yeah, guess you could say that." He sighs and drags a hand over his face.

"Did you sleep together last night? Y'all had the awkward morning after vibes set at ten, couldn't help but notice."

"Don't start this shit now, Robbie."

"*Robbie?* Aw, you do like me!" She cackles when Billy gives her a sour face.

Billy likes to end his nights inside the church, organizing whatever papers he's kept around and cleaning the organ pipes gently and thoroughly. Robin joins him now, a quiet but nice routine they make. She'll sweep through the pews, gathering bibles to be placed in their proper spots and oil polishing the old wood with a sort of reverence Billy wonders about. They're setting about their routine when two women in white coats enter the church and wait to be noticed.

"Are you Billy Hargrove?" The woman has a soft face, high cheekbones but a sweet smile on her mouth. Her long brown hair is put up while the other woman's short blonde hair is spiky.

"Who wants to know?" Robin asks, steps in front of him like she's gonna protect him. He sighs loudly and shoves her a few pews away, he's more than capable of handling this and whatever it is that's inside of him agrees.

The women share glances before a determined look settles over both of their faces. It's strange how in sync they are. He doesn't like it. He catches a glimpse of a halo of light over one of the women and the thing inside of him snarls, making a noise so nasty it reverberates around Billy's head for a minute. These women aren't from earth, maybe not exactly angels but something equivalent and Billy's loath to admit it's a little dumbfounding.

"You have something that doesn't belong to you." The dark haired woman says. She sounds bored but her posture is anything but. "Something that was never supposed to be freed again."

"Gonna have to give me some context, doll." Billy drawls out, he breathes in deep when he catches another glimpse of light above her head.

"We've tracked the Mindflyer here." Robin sucks in a breath and hisses *fucking demon*. Neither of the women change their posture but the blonde woman looks murderous now. "We've been keeping an eye on you and noticed some... discrepancies."

"There's demons? In Heaven?" Billy scoffs. "You're funny."

Neither of them look shocked to hear he's realized where they're from, the blonde gives a loaded look above and then turns her glare back on him.

"You're being possessed by a demon, Preacher." The dark haired woman sighs. "We just want to collect what's ours and leave you to your sermons."

"What's your name?" Robin asks, rolls her eyes at the three questioning looks sent her way. "What, you get to know us but we can't even address you? What's your fucking name?"

"I'm Heather and this is Katie." The dark haired woman- Heather- nods towards her partner. "We were tasked with keeping the Mindflyer in its dimension. Obviously a slight misjudgment was made but rest assured we shall deal with our own consequences."

"Yeah, I'd say if that fuckin' thing is loose in the real world then a

slight misjudgment was certainly made.” Robin snarks, snaps her teeth at the blonde woman when she turns.

“Well, Heather, I hate to be the bearer of bad news but there’s no demon here.” Billy says. “I’ve never heard of anything about a Mindflayer and I’m very dedicated to my scripture.” He pulls their attention to him as he walks towards the front of the church, catches Robin stealthily moving to circle behind the women. He didn’t want a fight but he’s happy to find that Robin has his back.

Bait and tackle. Classic. He and Steve perfected this in California. Its old hat at this point, honestly, so he does what he knows best and keeps his pace slow but steps loud. He counts the seconds in his head as he keeps eye contact, makes sure his audience is tuned into him and only him. Robin never looks at him and he returns that favor, doesn’t make her an unknowing target.

“Think you should take me seriously before it ruins your soul more than it already has.” Heather warns and Katie pulls out a canister from her coat. “We don’t have to hurt anyone even if that is the easiest extraction tactic.”

“Now you’re throwing threats? In my church? Y’all sure you’re heavenly?”

“Not a threat.” Katie says. “A guarantee.”

By now he’s in the front of the church, standing so close to the organ but so far from the podium. Robin has slunk behind the women, keeps her eyes on him for a sign to strike or a move from the women. She’s clenching her hands around one of the larger crucifixes that hang from the end of the pews, posed and ready for any attack needed. Billy keeps his eyes wide and searching, playing a slight innocence that everyone knows is false but the act is really the only thing keeping him from leaping down and bum rushing two women. He feels strange about that even if they are threatening him but he figures they can handle their own, especially if they were the ones keeping the dark thing inside him at bay.

“Like I said, there’s no demon here.”

Katie's eyes slip closed and she shakes her a little. Heather just nods a few times before biting her lip. Again, the women seem to be in sync as they both reach into their coats. Robin strikes first.

"This is a shame. A real big shame because I think we could've had something special." Robin sighs, put upon, while shoving a crucifix between Katie's shoulder blades. The woman gasps, hands scrabbling at her white coat. Robin twists and lets her drop to the floor before stabbing her again in the chest.

While Heather's distracted by the scene he pulls the pistol from his back pocket, something he always keeps on him now that he's back in Hawkins, and keeps it pointed at her. The blood pools pretty quickly, all things considered, and Robin's feet make a suction sound as she goes to step forward. Heather pulls her gun, aims it at Billy but doesn't blink when she sees he's had his daddy's pistol pointed at her.

"Now, don't go gettin' hasty Robin." She laughs at him then turns to face Heather.

She doesn't so much as shift as her face transforms into something evil. Her teeth elongate and her pupils expand to void any color in her eyes. She looks gaunt and terrifying but Billy keeps his composure. It's not the first time he's found out that fairytale monsters can be real and he's not about to turn the threat back on him. Heather doesn't even blink.

"Seems the demons have already gotten to you, Preacher." Heather says and it's obvious she knows she's out of her league here but she's still got the gun pointed at Billy and a hand in the air between her and Robin.

The thing inside him is screaming with glee, not a trace of fear or panic buzzing across his skin, he's in his Holy land and he's going to protect it for all that he can. Robin tosses a few taunts out but Heather never rises to the bait, keeps a cool expression like she's not about to shit her pants from an immortal being snarling in her face. For all he knows she's probably used to it. Robin gets closer and closer, licks her teeth and throws her head back with a laugh when Heather whispers something.

“Oh, I’m gonna bleed you dry.” She cheers. Billy pulls the trigger before Robin can leap across the space between them.

“I’m pretty sure she was the love of my life.” Robin sighs, tries to stretch her tongue out of her mouth to lick at the blood spatters on her face. “Tough love is my weakness and that bitch was fucking tough.”

“So, vampire, huh?” Billy asks, slides the gun back into his pants and looks at Robin expectantly.

“Problem?” She cocks an eyebrow.

“See one?” Bill asks back. “You just helped save my ass, no there’s not a damn problem.”

“Good.” She gives a half smile. “I’ll start digging a hole in the back but I expect you to stop me and do most of the work. You have an eight back for a reason.”

“You’re a comedian.” He huffs, resolutely does not look at the dead women in his church. He’s sure his daddy never had to clean blood like this from the wood floors.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I’ve never seen a Holy man so on board with homicide.”

“What can I say, Robbie, you bring out the beast in me.” She stares at him all concerned before rolling her eyes and exiting the hall.

He’s buried bodies before. Ones he’s killed and ones he’s been the clean up for. His grandma always told him that he’s gonna bring the apocalypse. That he has just enough good and evil to level the world as they know it. He’s been thinking all he had left was the bad since all he can do is bad shit. She made him think he can be good, can do good. That he can change himself, can change Steve and Max. Change change change. She said he holds the power of a thousand suns, that even God will shield his eyes from him. Then she died and he had to bury her too.

Max doesn’t ask about the stains on the floor, though she certainly smells the bleach that Robin mops it up with. She wrinkles her nose

and pats her rat's nest bed head down before shuffling into the kitchen. Keeps her mouth shut for the first twenty minutes of their morning and Billy's never been so grateful for it. He's a million percent sure he'll crack if she even asks. Robin must be back in the attic, he's never checked on her up there but he thinks she grabbed the mattress from the cellar and maybe dusted the spiders out. For all he knows she's up there hanging upside down by her toes and sleeping.

With the sun up he's forced to think about how long it's been since he's had a full night's sleep. He's forced to think about a lot of things until Murray crashes into the galley of the church shouting for him.

"What's going on, Murray? It's not even nine o'clock yet."

Murray's holding a manila folder, he's got sweat beading his lip and larger than life forehead, his eyes are wide and he's out of breath a bit but that's not stopping him from yapping his gums a mile a fuckin' minute.

"Slow down, slow down, man. I can't keep up. What's going on?"

"Word got out about Brenner taking the church and-" Billy shoots a glare over his shoulder to Max then blinks back to Murray. "I have information."

"Legally you have information or you brought me bunker junk?"

"Don't get caught up on the semantics, Preacher. As I recall, you didn't care much about legality before you came back."

"Times change, Murray." He sighs. "Alright, what do you have for me?"

"Brenner is known for his experiments. Energy fields that can power whole towns, electric cars, all sorts of new age technological stuff that runs off energy power." He pulls articles from the folder and sets them down on a pew for Billy to look over. It's nothing he hadn't seen in the local papers his father used to read, most of them dated back to that time period.

"Okay, that's not exactly news." Max says, flips an article over and

makes a disgruntled noise at a picture of Brenner. Murray gives her a dour look before striding away from them and spreading out eleven articles on the next pew.

“But then I found this.”

“Oh, shit.” Max whispers into her hand, eyes wide and watery.

They’re all missing posters of children, notes for rewards for information under pictures of smiling girls and boys. All of them were three years old and taken from a park two towns away. While it’s sad, Billy’s having trouble connecting the kids with Brenner.

“What do all these missing kids have to do with anything? This was seventeen years ago, Murray.”

Murray sighs in frustration before snatching up a poster for a girl called Jane. He hands it to Billy then peruses the other articles before grabbing one with a triumphant noise.

“Study her face.” He demands. “Study her face and then tell me this isn’t her.”

With both papers in his hands he compares the faces. The girl’s sharp chin is the same, same soulful eyes peering out at him. Only one says she’s missing and the other claims she’s Brenner’s daughter.

“He was experimenting on kids.” Billy says. He looks over to Max and finds her looking stricken. “You knew about this?” She shakes her head quickly, bites her lip then shakes her head again. She’s lying. That’s her tell, the lip thing, she always got caught when she bit her lip.

“I have to get ready for work.” She sighs, leaves them with the papers spread amongst the pews.

There will be time, later when they’re alone, to talk about the things the government forbids them from talking about with each other. The things Billy experienced during that time and the things that Max did. How their bond was forged and strengthened. Shared trauma usually does that, even if they weren’t sure they were sharing the same trauma. Billy’s starting to think that Brenner has more on them than

just what Susan did.

He stashes the articles from Murray in his truck's glove box and heads into town to visit the only grocery store worth a shit in this shit town. He's considering himself blessed that there aren't many people browsing the produce section when he enters, standing in front of the apples for five minutes before sighing through his nose. When he was younger his mother stressed baked, warm apple pies and fruit pastries. Always something sweet to negate the awfully bad emotions. He wishes, not for the first time, that he had picked that up from her instead of her addictive personality.

"The gala apples are in season right now." Someone says from his left and he jerks slightly out of his head. "The ones I've got at home have been so sweet."

"Mrs. Harrington." He greets, hopes his voice doesn't sound too defensive already but the dark haired woman gives a flat smile so he doesn't think he's that successful.

"Think by this point you can call me June." She sighs. "I thought I had heard the rumors wrong and you hadn't come back to town, yet, here you are." She says it like she's found an old friend in the aisles but Billy knows. He knows this isn't a social coincidence.

"Couldn't let the church go to waste." He shrugs.

"Indeed. Did he come home with you?" It's said nonchalantly enough, like she's talking about the weather. That's always how her interest in Steve has been.

"No. We're not together."

"Don't give me any bullshit, William, I know my boy would follow you to Hell if you so much as asked him." She's showing an emotion now, something between angry and morose. It might even be guilt. Billy wants to play with it, see just how deep it goes. Does it go all the way back to when Steve was ten, alone in a house with too many rooms and not enough eyes? When he was sixteen and sleeping with the lights on to protect him from monsters in the night? When he was seventeen and leaving without a note to find Billy?

Instead he bites his lip and thinks about their night in the dirt motel, how good it had felt to be together in nearly every way again, and closes his eyes.

“He’s here, yeah, but I didn’t want him to be. Not here, not ever.” She looks slightly relieved.

See, they have a history. A pact, if you will. Something Billy was supposed to uphold and failed to just like everything else. Keeping Steve out of Hawkins was supposed to be his life’s mission, something he swore to her he would always do. Something he forgot the importance of.

“Where? Where is he staying?” She grabs a green apple and turns it in her palm, inspects the skin with her thumb before grabbing a plastic bag and sliding it in.

“You’re not gonna do that shit to him again, June. I fucked up letting him find me here but you’re not going to make this worse than it needs to be.” It sets his teeth on edge to be threatening her when he knows just how powerful she can make herself.

“I told you this town will set itself on fire if he were to ever come home. I told you what would happen. It’s not my fault that you won’t listen to me. But maybe your all forgiving Father above can save y’all. He must know that I can’t anymore.”

Robin wasn’t his first foray into inhumans. Not even in the slightest. No, seeing June Harrington with glowing orange eyes and purple magic flowing from her fingertips was the first time. The magic she’s pumped into the town flickers and pulses at the edge of his skin, the reminder never lost on him. He says nothing, grabs a prepackaged bag of red apples and steps away.

“Billy.” She calls. He only half turns to her, not enough to make eye contact but enough to let her know he’s listening. “You must know I have to say something.”

“Keep me out of it.” He suggests and continues on his way.

It's late. Late enough to hear the bugs screaming from the trees, the toads roaring their stories to the skies, cats and other mammals hunting their dinners. Late and loud. Max came home and has yet to show her face to him. Missed dinner and everything. Robin left something like an hour ago to "find a bite to eat" and blow off some steam. He's sitting on the front steps of the porch, lungs breathing the humidity and making his chest feel heavy, a bottle of whiskey between his fingers. There's nothing but woods and dirt roads for miles, so far from town that the glow from the city doesn't affect the sky out here. He's reminded of something his father used to preach often. Thousands of yards untouched by man.

"We come from dirt and to dirt we will return." He said when he wanted to give Billy perspective on his boyish problems. Bad date with a girl he was never interested in? Dirt. Accidentally broke one of Susan's fine China dishes? Chokehold, forced apology, dirt. It's almost enough to make his mental state feel calm. At the end of the day he is nothing more than dirt put on this earth but his Holy Father.

Then, in the distance, a motor roaring and tires squealing. He knows it's Steve before he can even see the headlights. He thinks he was waiting for this, for him. He stays seated on the steps, doesn't blink when the headlights flash across him, doesn't flinch at the slamming of the car door. Steve leaves the motor running, doesn't pause more than to throw it into park before he's out and on Billy.

"What gives you the *mother fucking right*?" He shouts, kicking dirt up and pointing his finger in Billy's face. "Answer me, you piece of shit. What makes you think you can even approach my fucking mother?"

"She came up to me." He shoves Steve's hand away but Steve just brings his foot up and kicks the bottle from Billy's hand. "Harrington—"

"No, fuck you." He spits. "You keep saying and acting like you want nothin' to do with, fuck around with me in some shitty motel then ignore me for days and now you're talkin' to my fucking mom! She knows who you are to me. You're half the fuckin' reason—" He cuts himself off, breathing hard and looking anywhere but at Billy.

His eyes are wild when they finally make their way to him, just like

the first time he'd killed something. Something with thousands of teeth.

"Reason for what?" Billy asks. He knows, he knows the answer like he knows himself. "I want to hear you say it." Lets his voice go low and dangerous. "Tell me like I don't already fuckin' know, Steve, come on. Let's throw it in my face once again, like you didn't enough."

"I was a kid-"

"Oh, like you're not acting like one right now?" Billy tests, finally stands and shoves Steve back a step.

"You didn't have to say shit to her." Steve says after finding his footing.

"Plant your fuckin' feet." Billy says, shoves him again just to watch him stumble.

"Why did you say anything to her?" He asks, steps away from Billy when he lurches forward again. "Stop fuckin' shoving me! Why did you say anything to her, you asshole?"

"Like she didn't already know you came home! Probably fuckin' sensed it as soon as you crossed county lines."

"You're still on that my mom is a witch shit? Now who's the child?"

"Stop starting your shit with me. You shouldn't have ever come home, you absolute bullheaded fucking baby."

"I don't know why I came home either. I heard you were here and something just... called me back." Steve sighs, shoves a hand in his hair. "You think I wasn't eager to be done with you just as much as you were with me? Think I enjoyed that shit? Can't ever depend on you for anything other than solid sex, nothing has changed there apparently."

It cuts like Steve wanted it to. Billy hates himself.

"You hate me so much? Get the fuck away from me then." Steve

makes no move. "Go on! Get!" Billy shouts, coughs when his voice cracks.

They're both breathing roughly, looking at each other like they're not sure what to do. This is the part of the fight where they throw themselves at each other, say they never would leave the other and have make up sex.

Billy finds he'd be just fine without that progression. That's new. He's never hated Steve like he does right now.

"Both of you need to get the fuck inside. Now." Max says from behind them. She's eying the emptying whiskey bottle and the tense stance they're both taking. "I'm ready to talk about this morning. Steve knows about it, too."